

Joint Committee on Higher Education and Employment Advancement

Public Testimony of the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund

Senate Bill No. 636: *An Act Concerning Affirmative Consent*

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My name is Kim Cerullo, a Master's of Social Work Student at the University of Connecticut School of Social Work, and a Public Policy Intern at the Connecticut Women's Education and Legal Fund (CWEALF). CWEALF is a statewide non-profit organization dedicated to empowering women, children, and their families to achieve equal opportunities in their personal and professional lives. On behalf of CWEALF, and as a student, I would like to bring your attention to the importance of Proposed Bill No. 636: *An Act Concerning Affirmative Consent*.

As an organization focused on women and girls, who are disproportionately the victims of sexual assault, CWEALF supports S.B. 636 because it is a valuable opportunity to reassess how universities and other institutions of higher education can best protect the victims of sexual assault, and create a campus culture that discourages sexual assault. As a student, I am also personally invested in seeing affirmative consent policies implemented, both on my campus and at campuses across the state.

I have spent the past five years as a student at the University of Connecticut. While I am currently attending UConn's School of Social Work for my graduate degree, I also attended the main (Storrs) campus for my undergraduate degree. During my time there, many students at my university reported that navigating the Office of Community Standards' process of reporting an incident of assault was frustrating and often focused far too much on the actions of the victim rather than the perpetrator. Similar issues are heard at universities across Connecticut and across the country. While campus culture and the treatment of victims of sexual assault at this university and others have improved and continue to do so, more needs to be done to create a safer campus environment for everyone.

The proposed legislation regarding affirmative consent could help bridge that safety gap. When determining whether sexual activity was consensual, the current standard at many institutions of higher education is based on whether or not the victim withdrew consent, or said "no," to sexual activity. Affirmative consent shifts the focus to whether or not the perpetrator stopped to receive the victim's consent – a conscious, voluntary, "yes" – to sexual activity. Affirmative consent is an important tool in determining whether sexual activity was consensual that should not be discounted. Proposed Senate Bill No. 636 would require all institutions of higher education to incorporate this valuable tool into their existing policies. Students who report their sexual assault would see their case examined from multiple angles and based on diverse criteria, improving their chances of a just outcome.

Affirmative consent policies could do more than simply improve schools' sexual assault investigation procedures. Focusing on the perpetrator's behavior, rather than whether or not the

victim did enough to prevent assault, could create a shift in how we think about sexual assault prevention on campus. New or existing sexual assault prevention and awareness programs could build on this foundation of affirmative consent to create a dialogue among students, staff, and faculty about the importance of consent, communication, and healthy sexual relationships. In turn, this could create a campus environment or culture in which consent is valued and sexual assault is further discouraged. Such a culture would hopefully reduce the incidence of sexual assault on campus.

Students' safety and comfort is important in creating an effective and enjoyable learning environment on campus, and CWEALF supports sexual assault prevention efforts, facilitated by S.B. 636's provisions, that will allow students to better participate in and benefit from their education. Affirmative consent policies will make students like me feel safer overall. Thank you for your consideration and for allowing me the opportunity to submit written testimony.